

"OLD MOTHER KETTERING."

A CHRISTMAS STORY FOR GROWN-UP CHILDREN. By HENRY NORMANBY.

A simple little tale that, nevertheless, epitomises all the pathetic mystery of life in the person of a grey-haired old woman who was once a golden-haired, merry, laughing child.



T was a regular, genuine, old-fashioned, uncomfortable Christmas, the sort that foolish people nowadays complain that they haven't got, instead of being very thankful that they haven't; a Christmas of bitter winds and driving snow, when those fortunate folks who have money to pay for them sit round blazing coal fires and say what nice, healthy, bracing weather it is, and those unfortunate ones who haven't any money go without the fire and say what nasty, unhealthy, bitter weather it is; a Christmas of frozen wells and numbed fingers, of coughs and colds, bronchitis and rheumatism, of poverty and unhappiness, discontent and misery.

Ah, well! never mind all that now; I don't want to write or think of anything unpleasant, and I'm sure you don't want to read of such things. I have something very much better to tell you, and that is about "Old Mother Kettering," as the boys called her, for three excellent reasons—firstly, because she was old; secondly, because she was a mother; and, thirdly, because her name was Kettering. Of course there was a time when she was neither, but that was before you knew her, and so I must tell you about it.

What a long time ago it is since "Old Mother Kettering" was young Maid Marjorie! "Merry Marjorie," they called her then, because she was always laughing, except, of course, when she was sorry for anyone, and then she cried. I remember her, for I'm a very old man, and I should have been older if I hadn't known Marjorie. I grow young when I think of her, and as I often think of her I grow younger all the time. Presently I shall go into knickerbockers, and then into frocks. But it is Marjorie I want to talk about, not myself—Merry Marjorie, with golden curls, red shoes with silver buckles, and a blue sash.

It always seems Christmas when I think of Marjorie, perhaps because it was at a Christmas party I first saw her. She was seven years old—or rather seven years young—and the party was given in honour of her birthday. If you wonder how on earth such an old fogey as I came to

be there, you must remember that just as Marjorie was once a little girl so I was once a little boy. You see, even an old fogey wasn't an old fogey always.

It was one of those old-fashioned Christmases that I started telling you about; the snow was all over the ground, and the trees looked so miserable with their feet standing in it and no nice leaves to keep them warm, and it was still falling and having a most tremendous time with the wind, which was hurrying home for the holidays; the flakes dancing and tumbling about, falling over one another and getting so mixed up that sometimes they couldn't separate and so tumbled down together all in a heap.

Marjorie used to wonder why the snow came down all that way from the sky just to melt on the ground. I didn't know why then, but I think I know now—it was to see Marjorie.

She was worth going a much longer distance than that to see, I can tell you; such bright eyes she had (because they were new ones) and such dimpled cheeks, and such rosy lips, and those golden curls tied up with a blue ribbon. You should have seen her little white frock with three bright blue bows on it, and the blue sash I told you of, not to mention the red shoes with silver buckles. I fell such a long distance in love with her that really I wonder it didn't break my neck; it didn't quite do that, but it affected my heart so much that it was never the same heart afterwards.

How she laughed when Jack-in-the-box jumped out! Why, I can hear her now, and sixty Christmases have gone by since then. Oh, how we danced and romped and pulled crackers and played forfeits and hunted the slipper! And how shy she was when I kissed her—I wonder how I ever had the courage to do it, but what a delight I should have missed if I hadn't! Good gracious me! What nonsense I talk! Sixty years ago! Why, it couldn't have been more than sixty seconds, for I can feel the warmth and sweetness of that kiss now.

When the party was over and we were going away Marjorie insisted on leaving some fruit and nuts and a tin soldier on the doorstep as a present to Santa Claus, who had brought her so many toys in the morning. I went back afterwards and took them away so that she should not be disappointed at finding them still there when she looked in the morning. I have the tin soldier now, and, although all his paint is off, I wouldn't give him away for a whole regiment of Life Guards, horses and all.

She was very sweet and happy that Christmas, and very, very pretty. Can it really have been sixty years ago? When I look in the glass I'm afraid it was, but when I think of little Marjorie I don't believe it.

As surely as Christmas comes to us it goes away again, and as it kept coming and going Marjorie grew older and bigger, but nobody seemed to notice how old and how big she was getting until ten more Christmases had come and gone, and then somebody said, "Why, bless my soul, Marjorie's seventeen!" And so she really and truly was.

Of course she didn't wear a short frock with blue bows then—oh, dear, no! And her hair didn't hang down any longer—not so long, in fact, because, being now a young woman, she tucked it away somewhere on the

top of her head and fastened it out of sight with a lot of pins ; but she couldn't hide her dimples, and her lips were just as red—or a bit redder—and her laugh was sweeter than ever.

Old Father Time is a terrible chap for marching on—he won't stop for anybody ; so before you could say Jack Robinson it was Christmas again, and Marjorie's birthday in addition, and the day of her betrothal as well. We all went to the party, and there never was such a delightful sight as Marjorie on that Christmas evening. I simply could not keep my eyes off her, however much I tried. Of course I didn't really try at all, but if I had tried I couldn't have done it. What with her lovely hair tumbling all about in a most distracting manner, and her pretty shoes (to go from one extreme to the other), and her rosy cheeks and bewitching dimples, and her happy laughter and roguish ways, and her charming wiles and graces, and everything altogether, we were all nearly driven clean out of our minds.

As to the fortunate fellow who was her chosen lover—well, there, it isn't likely that I'm going to say much about *him*.

When the last dance was over and the lights were dying out, just as all sweet and all sad things die away into the past and forgotten, I drew near to kiss her good-night. As I told her how much I hoped that many more joyous Christmases would be hers—and mine if I might spend them in the same way—I think I saw—in fact, I'm sure I saw—tears in her beautiful eyes ; yet I know she was very happy, despite those brave, compassionate tears which dimmed for a little space her hopeful outlook upon the world. Sweet, dear Marjorie, who never saw evil in any living soul !

Two years afterwards she was married, and of course wasn't Marjorie any longer, but was Mrs. Kettering instead ; but I shall call her Marjorie, and so may you.

Mr. Kettering was a fisherman, and that is why they lived close to the sea. She always loved the clear blue, dancing sea, and was never so happy as when she was playing about on the great brown, sober rocks, which were so determined not to be washed away, and never got drowned although their heads were under water for hours at a time.

She loved it best when it danced merrily in the sunshine and cast its white spray abundantly at her feet, murmuring to her all the while its soft and wonderful music. When at night the great gales thundered and made the sea angry she was afraid, for she knew only too well that away out of sight in the deep darkness poor struggling men were in danger of shipwreck and death.

Marjorie was more afraid of the anger of the sea after she married her fisherman lover. She used to gaze out over the wide waters with such a tenderly anxious look in her eyes, wondering, I fancy, if it could ever be cruel to her.

I have seen her hundreds of times standing on the little grey break-water waiting for the return of his boat, waiting so trustfully and patiently, but she never would go down to the quay to see him set sail. I think it was because she could not bear to see him go away, but she was always there to welcome him back—that was a different matter altogether.

The sea was very kind to her and always brought her lover back safe and sound, and then they returned to their cottage, and he sat in the little room and smoked his pipe while she mended his clothes, which were always getting torn in a dreadful manner. She was quite happy and contented, and in this manner the short days went by, and the long weeks, and the longer months, and the much longer years. Christmas kept coming and going as it always does, and of course Marjorie and her husband grew older and older just as you are doing and I have done. Her little boy became a bigger boy, and then a big boy, and then a young man, and—bless me! I don't believe I told you that Marjorie had a little boy. Oh, dear; oh, dear! You see how old and forgetful I am; but, never mind, I've told you now, so it doesn't matter, does it?

Well, as I was saying, Marjorie's boy grew up and became a fisherman like his father. At first he used to go with his father; then "Old Jack" began to stay at home sometimes and "Young Jack" began to take charge; and as the father stayed on shore oftener the son went oftener by himself, until at last "Old Jack" retired and "Young Jack" became captain and owner of the boat. He was a good son and carefully looked after his father and mother now that they were unable to look after themselves.

And all the while the years went on slipping away into the silent past, and nobody thought anything at all about them until something dreadful happened. One day, in very bad weather, the fishing-boat went out to sea and never came home again. Poor Marjorie waited hopefully at first; then she lost faith in the sea, and ever grieved deeply. The sight of the treacherous water was more than she could bear, and presently the old couple went away to a village a long distance from the coast, where they settled down and tried to earn a living. To earn a living seems an easy thing to do to those who haven't to do it, but the task weighed heavily on the old fisherman and his wife, and it grew heavier as the months went by and brought them little but increase of infirmities. "Old Jack" earned a few pence now and then by doing odd jobs, while Marjorie did needlework. She never complained and never looked doleful or ill-tempered—at least, if she did no one ever saw it. I know I never did, and I saw "Old Mother Kettering" very, very often. The neighbours, out of the kindness of their hearts, often gave them work which either need not have been done at all or which they could easily have done themselves; but a more severe winter than usual brought poverty to the doors of all, and the outlook for Marjorie and her husband was dark indeed.

Let it be here set down and recorded that not once through all that grievous time did Marjorie complain. She was always the same sweet, trusting soul, always cheerful, always loving, and always a comfort to "Old Jack." Her happy laugh, truly, was heard less often, but its music never varied, and even in her darkest hour she yet watched with brave, compassionate eyes for the coming of the dawn.

Christmas was at hand once more. Oh, such a bitter, bitter Christmas. The ponds and streams were frozen solid, the icy north wind made one shudder to hear it, all the land was buried deep in snow—snow that looked

so beautiful and felt so cold. The sheep were dying in hundreds, and all over the country thousands of men were seeking vainly for work. It was that genuine, old-fashioned, uncomfortable Christmas I started telling you about, and I must go on now because it has a great deal to do with my story.

There was nothing to be done out of doors, even if one had been able to do it, so Marjorie and her husband stayed in the house, and their small store of provisions got smaller and smaller, and by the time the eve of Christmas had come there was nothing left at all. Just think of it—bitter winter weather, no work, no fire, and nothing to eat!

What do you think "Old Mother Kettering" did? Went about the house wringing her hands and weeping? Well, that is just what you or I would have done, but Marjorie did nothing of the sort. She knew they had tried their very best, and if they were poor—as, indeed, they were—it was not their fault. She couldn't ask for assistance from anyone, and she wouldn't have asked if she could. No, Marjorie did a very wise and proper thing—she went straight off to the workhouse. Before setting out she made a parcel of the few things she most prized and took it into a neighbour's, asking her to take care of it for her; she then reckoned up all the money she owned in the world, and it came to eightpence-halfpenny. This she distributed amongst the children which she met on the road, so that they approached the temple dedicated to the service of the sorrowful more in the manner of conquerors going their flower-strewn way than as weary strugglers seeking a hermitage.

Together they set out along the snow-covered road, Marjorie and her husband; and I think that never in all her life was she more beautiful and dignified. The pretty curls, once golden as the sun, were now as white as the snow she walked on, there were no blue bows on the old, faded frock, and coarse, heavy boots had long since replaced the little red shoes with silver buckles in which she danced so merrily at that Christmas party long ago. But the dimples were still in her cheeks, and through her tears she smiled at the children who crowded round the window of the toy-shop with a view to subsequent barter. I love to think that neither misfortune nor sorrow ever had the power to take away that sweet and gracious smile.

The workhouse was nearly three miles away, and when they started the sky was as black as a bad man's heart, and the snow was falling heavily; but it soon began to brighten up wonderfully, and the nearer they got to the dismal building the brighter the sky became, until, as they came in sight of it, the fiery red sun suddenly pushed his head out of a great black cloud, and a magnificent blaze of light and warmth shone down on the poor shivering old man and woman as they tramped along the dreary road.

And that wasn't all, for lots of little half-frozen birds who were sitting up in the trees and wondering where their Christmas worm was to come from suddenly began to sing with all their might, and that wasn't all either, for just as they turned a corner of the road who should they see marching along towards them but a great, big, burly man, and as he came nearer Marjorie thought for a moment how much he was like the son who was lost

at sea, and when he came nearer still she stopped and pressed her hands to her heart and cried out to him, for it was indeed he—that long-lost only son—and Marjorie's husband gazed at him in a dreadful uncertainty, fearing to presently discover that they had dreamed their joy.

But it wasn't a dream—it was all real, all truth, and all happiness. There was "Young Jack," with his red, sunburnt face; "Young Jack" dressed in brand new clothes and wearing a real watch and chain; "Young Jack" with his pockets full of money and his heart full of love; "Young Jack" who never was drowned and never will be. And the sun went on shining like mad, and the birds kept singing with all their might, and Marjorie kept laughing till she cried, and crying till she laughed again; and "Old Jack" kept saying it beat him, bust him if it didn't!

"Young Jack" declared they shouldn't walk another step, and wanted to carry Marjorie, but she said she wasn't a bit tired, which, of course, was scandalously untrue; but as they couldn't get home by standing there, and as Marjorie declared that go back she wouldn't until they had been to the workhouse and given no less than sixpence to every old lady and gentleman who happened to have the ill-fortune to be there, they tramped on again, and Marjorie went to the workhouse after all.

The master very kindly allowed "Old Mother Kettering" to give the sixpences herself to the old people under his charge, there were forty-eight of them, for it was a small workhouse, and they had such a job to get so many sixpences. You should have seen Marjorie giving them away. How the old people blessed her, and some of them cried, and then Marjorie cried also, but most of them laughed, and Marjorie laughed as well, and they were very happy really, and "Old Mother Kettering" was the happiest of them all.

When it was time to go home a horse and trap suddenly came from somewhere, and Marjorie and "Old Jack" and "Young Jack" drove back just the same as the squire himself would have done. Goodness only knows how they had heard about it, but all the folks of the village were waiting for them, and everybody cheered so much that they were quite hoarse the next day, and Mrs. Snusher, who kept the drug-store, sold out her stock of liquorice in no time.

It would take a great deal too long to tell you how it was that "Young Jack" didn't get drowned and why it was that he couldn't come back before. Some other time I shall tell you all that, but now I must go and put on my best clothes and brush up my hat, because I am going to wish Marjorie a Merry Christmas. You shall come with me if you like, so that in after years you may tell your children how "Old Mother Kettering" smiled on you with her sweet, compassionate eyes.

Come and wish her many more happy years, as I wish you. Do you hear the bells ringing? So in my soul rings ever the music of her voice.